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A SOUTHERN VIEW OF SLAVERY

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It is nearing a half-century since the arbitrament of war removed from the body politic for all time that most fruitful source of sectional friction, the institution of slavery. Surely, therefore, it should now be possible for North and South to discuss the subject dispassionately.

I hold no brief for the defense of slavery, but belonging to the fast-thinning ranks of a generation which links together the South of past and present, being closely in touch with the old régime, and having a personal knowledge of conditions then existing, I desire, in the interests of historic truth, to present as concisely as possible an *inside* view of the institution of slavery: First, as regards its effects upon the white race; and secondly, in its relation to the negro, in which last aspect the subject naturally divides itself into two parts, viz., the moral warrant for slavery, and the practical workings of the system as it actually existed in the southern states.

As being in many respects closely allied both to the patriarchal, and the feudal system, the institution of slavery in the United States might be regarded as a "survival," and, like all anachronisms, it naturally jarred upon the sense of fitness in those unacquainted with its special adaptation to the peculiar circumstances of the case.

Before entering upon the subject, however, an explanatory word may not be out of place, to guard against possible misapprehension. First: Desiring only to present statements verified by actual observation, I shall describe the system in my native state; having no reason to suppose that slavery in South Carolina differed in essential particulars from slavery in the other southern states. Secondly: Throughout this paper I propose to speak of general, representative types, not of exceptional,

individual instances. Thus, when speaking of the white race at the South, I refer to the dominant class, not to that insignificant fraction of the population known as "the poor whites," who were utterly without influence, and whose existence was practically ignored. Upon this class there is little doubt that slavery did produce an injurious effect. For to their distorted mental vision labor presented itself as the badge of servitude, and the refusal to labor as the easiest and most conclusive proof of their own superiority to the negro. With them, however, we have no further concern.

It is a total misconception to suppose that the slave-owner exercised an unbounded control over his slaves. Legal enactments in the several states prescribed the limits of his authority. Within these limits it is true the system was liable to abuse; and in the South as elsewhere, to base and ignoble natures the possession of power invited to tyranny. But there were two very effective checks upon this occasional abuse of legal authority: the pressure of public opinion, which was invariably brought to bear upon the offender, and the still more cogent consideration of self-interest. For it was not, as with the employers of contract or coolie labor, merely a question of getting as much work as possible out of an employee within a given time and then being rid of him. If, from overtaxing his strength or from maltreatment of any kind, a slave were physically disabled, he became a burden on his owner for life, and an unmarketable commodity. Therefore, even where humanity was lacking, greed insured the negro against flagrant ill-usage.

As a class, it is a gross injustice to southern slave-holders to assert that they considered themselves the irresponsible owners of human "chattels." No people the world over comprehended more thoroughly and felt more acutely the weight of responsibility entailed upon them by their position. (I may say parenthetically that this weight having been removed, no power on earth could compel them again voluntarily to assume it.)

Now, to consider the effects of the system upon this class. Like all territorial rulers, how limited soever their sphere of control may be, the southern landowner, though not a despot, was

something of an autocrat. By virtue of the position he occupied, his utterances were necessarily to a certain extent *ex cathedra*. And in his intercourse with his fellows he felt himself untrammelled by those considerations of politic expediency which must inevitably hamper men dependent upon the good offices of others for their chance of success in life. In other words, the southern landowner was his own master. And this consciousness of entire independence occasionally begot in him an overbearing arrogance and impatience of opposition.

It is also true that, as a people, these dwellers of the Southland were imbued with a very exalted estimate of their own importance. To themselves, they seemed to be at the center of things, and the world revolved around them. But this assumption of superiority on their part was not so offensive a display of egotism as at first sight it might seem; for it was based, not upon an overweening sense of their own personal merit, but, upon their proud distinction as citizens of the South. For never was patriotism more ardent than theirs. And the knowledge that at the bar of outside public opinion their beloved country was unjustly judged and ignorantly condemned for crimes of which she was wholly innocent, naturally produced the double effect of banding them closely together among themselves in a "the-world-against-me I-against-the-world" sort of brotherhood, and of lowering their opinion of the clear-sightedness and fair-mindedness of all beyond their own borders.

In these respects the institution of slavery undoubtedly exercised a very perceptible formative influence on southern character. But as regards other traits, its effects are not so apparent. Their hot temper and proneness to resentment of fancied slights, for example, cannot with justice be laid to the account of environment. And the charges of indolence and thriftlessness so often brought forward, were at least as much the results of an enervating semi-tropical climate as of the system.

But while it is true that, as a rule, southern people were disinclined to laborious physical exertion, it by no means follows that their lives were spent in idleness. In point of fact, although exempt from manual toil, the average southern planter was an ex-

ceedingly hard-working man; the number of his dependents, so far from lessening, actually adding to his labors by increasing the demands made upon him. For as I have said, he fully recognized the requirements of his position, and for the most part, honestly endeavored to discharge his obligations to the best of his ability. It frequently taxed to the uttermost his resources, both of purse and brain, to provide for the necessities of those committed to his care. But the bond between a master and his "people" (the word "slaves" rarely passed southern lips except when used officially) was a very strong one, and, to his honor be it spoken, the southern planter rarely shrank from the self-sacrifice involved in securing the welfare of those to whom he felt himself pledged.

With regard to the oft-repeated accusation of illiteracy: while pleading guilty to the indictment itself, so far as a general dissemination of book-learning was concerned, the cause of this illiteracy was to be found, in part at least, in adverse natural conditions. As in all purely agricultural communities the (white) population of the south was sparse and widely scattered. The distances were great, the plantations being so extensive that in country neighborhoods it was impossible to collect scholars enough at any one given point to establish schools. Men of wealth, themselves for the most part university graduates, secured home tuition for their children, or sent them abroad for education (and no more cultivated people were to be found anywhere than these gentle folk of the old South). But, unfortunately, their number was comparatively small, and of the remaining majority, many who would gladly have availed themselves of educational advantages for their families, had these been near at hand, were debarred by want of means from giving them a liberal education.

If, however, judged by the rule of strictly scholastic acquirement, the South fell short, in point of moral education its general standard was a high one. For, given a people with normal sensibilities and healthy moral tone, trained from infancy to regard itself as the defender of the helpless and the support of the weak; and is it not inevitable that in that people a certain dignity, strength, and self-reliance of character should be developed?

And this was, in point of fact, the effect produced upon the southern whites by the institution of slavery.

So much, then, for the first division of our subject. Now, to consider the second.

For the purposes of this article it is not necessary to enter into the history of American slavery, suffice it to say, that it behooves those who would cast a stone at the South to recall the fact that for the importation of the negro into this country she is in nowise responsible.

Ethically considered, the defense of slavery rests upon the radical and essential difference between the races. That such a difference exists has been proved by the incontrovertible logic of events. For had color been, as claimed, the great differentiating mark between the caucasian and the negro, no outside intervention would have been necessary to bring about emancipation; history witnessing to the fact that—apart from racial inferiority—only by force of numbers can one people be held in subjection by another. The bare fact, therefore, that at the South the blacks greatly outnumbered the whites, proves conclusively the superiority of the latter race. Wherein this superiority consists I shall attempt briefly to indicate.

Apart from ethnological differences which need not here be enumerated, both intellectually and morally there is a great and impassable gulf, fixed by nature between the white man and the black. That the negro's present state of semi-barbarism is the result of generations of slavery is a fallacy pure and simple. As a matter of fact slavery, so far from degrading the negro, has actually elevated him industrially, mentally, and even morally, the term of his involuntary tutelage to the white race raising him to a vastly higher level than that ever occupied by his kinsmen in Africa. For we are to remember that the negro entered upon the stage of mundane existence at quite as early a date as did the white man—nay, some believe at a much earlier one.

Why then is it that, while the white races have emerged from barbarism and steadily ascended, step by step, from a lower to a higher plane of civilization, the negro has remained stationary from the dawn of the world's history up to the present time;

and is today, as much of a savage in his native land as when first he trod the earth?

Must it not be conceded that the race is utterly lacking in the power of initiative; that all advance and betterment must come to it from without? Therein lies the fundamental and rudimentary intellectual distinction between the races. The white race has within itself evolutionary potentialities; the negro race has none.

The few full-blooded negroes who have attained to positions of prominence must be relegated to the category of "freaks," and, like all other freaks of nature, these rare and exceptional cases prove nothing for the race to which they belong. If careful investigation be made, it will be found that the so-called "negroes," who have in any way distinguished themselves above their fellows, are not full-blooded negroes, but half-breeds. And it is to this mixed lineage that their superiority is due.

The moral distinction between the races is equally marked. The negro labors under a racial disability to grasp and apply moral principles. The arraignment may seem a harsh one, but it is fully borne out by facts, as will be testified by all those who from force of circumstances have been compelled to make the negro character a life-long study. In the old South, so well known were his moral limitations that it was an unwritten law never to hold a negro delinquent to account for a certain class of offenses, the injustice of applying to him the rigid code by which white offenders were to be judged being fully recognized.

As in all races, differences of mental constitution of course exist, and there are degrees of virtue and vice. But whereas, the white man's moral code is, theoretically at least, an inclusive one, embracing all the requirements of the moral law; the code of the negro, both theoretically and practically is, so to speak, a purely elective code; even the best negroes failing utterly to perceive the essential connection and interdependence of its several parts.

Like the "new-caught, sullen peoples" whom Mr. Kipling describes as "half-devil and half-child" the negro's nature is a composite one. But it is only just to him to say that in his case the relative proportions are changed for the better, one-quarter

“devil” and three-quarters “child” being a more accurate description of his character. Like the child, many of his virtues are negative. He is neither grasping, nor malicious, nor vindictive. He is naturally confiding, and is easily controlled by those who have won his confidence. He is generous warm hearted, cheerful, and, for the most part, happy-tempered and obliging. He is (also like the child) entirely without foresight and absolutely irresponsible. For him the future is not; the present alone exists.

So much for the one side of his nature. For the other only those whose lot has led them to sojourn among barbarous tribes can comprehend the sudden wondrous change wrought in this people by excitement. Frenzy is the word which best describes the transformation. Those who, but one brief hour before, were laughing, chattering, peaceable members of the community, are subject at any moment to be converted by some trivial occurrence into fierce, howling, blood-thirsty savages. The knowledge of this ever-present possibility necessarily influenced the southerner in his treatment of the negro; and made him look with a jealous eye upon all attempts at tampering with the discipline necessary to hold in check this dangerous element.

In common with all ignorant races, the negro is extremely superstitious and exceedingly credulous, so that he falls an easy prey to the artful and designing. He is also emotional to a degree. This last trait it is which impresses casual observers with the idea of his remarkable religious susceptibility. But a longer acquaintance and more thorough study of his character would show, that to the negro “religion” is simply a pleasurable emotional excitement, having no restraining influence whatever upon conduct.

In ante-bellum days, however, so far as nature permitted, he was trained to tread the paths of rectitude. Such is the negro from the southerner’s point of view, which must of necessity be a realistic one; proximity to the object depriving him of the perspective essential to its idealization.

Next, to consider the practical workings of the system as existing in the southern states.

What the theory of evolution is to the scientist, that the

institution of slavery was to the southern man. It might not be the absolutely true and perfect solution of the negro problem, but it was at least the best "working-hypothesis," known to him for harmonizing the conflicting elements brought into compulsory contact in the South.

To the northern imagination, slavery presented itself as a subversion of the very laws of (American) nature, with a thrill of indignant sympathy the northerner pictured himself to himself as a slave, with his sensibilities blunted, his aspirations blighted, his highest, holiest instincts outraged, and his very manhood crushed out of him. And the sense of this moral degradation, even more than the ceaseless, hopeless toil and the actual physical torture supposed to be inseparably connected with the system, entered like iron into his soul, and his conscience revolted from dooming millions of his hapless fellow-mortals to a fate so appalling.

The North erred—not in condemning the system of slavery conjured up by its own imagination, but in failing to acquaint itself with the actual facts of the case before passing judgment upon it. And this injustice it was which the South resented so bitterly.

First, as regards the cruelties believed to have been constantly inflicted upon the slaves by their masters, I am not willing to assert that instances of cruel treatment were unknown, but I can truthfully say that such cases were the rare exceptions. Neither shall I deny the fact that on plantations flogging was the general mode of discipline. But I altogether fail to see wherein flogging is a more barbarous and revolting punishment when administered to black agricultural laborers, than to white soldiers and sailors. And be it remembered that at the time we are now considering, that humanitarian spirit, which has of late years exerted such a powerful influence on public opinion, ameliorating punishment of every kind, was then unknown. Consequently, it is manifestly unjust to apply present-day standards of discipline to the methods of the past. That the slaves were not generally ill-treated, however, is proved by the wonderful increase in their numbers, for it must be borne in mind that the slave population of the South

was not recruited by fresh importations from abroad but augmented by natural growth. So far from being maltreated indeed, not only were their physical wants supplied, not only were they well fed, abundantly clothed, and comfortably housed, but their spiritual needs were also provided for. In a neighborhood the planters would combine to pay the salary of a clergyman who devoted himself to missionary work on their several plantations. All the ordinances of the church were duly observed, the sacraments were administered, and marriages solemnized. But besides this official church-membership, the negroes were allowed free latitude in the matter of church affiliation, and were Presbyterians, Baptists, or Methodists, according to taste, with "preachers" and "class-leaders" of their own color and choice. Besides its chapel, each plantation was provided with its hospital and its "children's house" (a day-nursery it would now be called), where the children were left each day by the mothers on their way to work under the charge of a competent nurse.

Although the statement seem superfluous to those familiar with southern ways, it may be well to say that on all plantations Sunday was, as a matter of course, observed as a day of rest. Besides this weekly holiday three days were always given at Christmas time, along with a "Christmas treat."

The assertion so often made that slave labor was *unpaid* labor is founded upon a misunderstanding of the facts. True, slave labor was not paid in currency. But the laborer whose toil secured to him food, clothing, and shelter could hardly be said to go unrequited. Besides which, this system laid most effectually that specter of provision for the future which haunts the laboring-man the world over. From the helplessness of earliest infancy, to the feebleness of extreme old age, whether an active, stalwart worker, or a useless, chronic invalid, the negro knew that as long as life lasted, the supply of all his wants was assured. Surely this feature of the institution alone should count for much, in any consideration of the subject, and has never, it seems to the writer, received the recognition which is its due.

Selling negroes away from their homes, and dividing families are also charges which were frequently brought against slave-

holders. As regards the first: It is true that negroes were sometimes removed by sale from one plantation to another, occasionally, even from one state to another; but generally speaking, plantations and negroes were sold together and, except, for the change of masters, the slave's life went on as before without break of any kind. With respect to the second charge: Mothers and children were seldom separated, *never* mothers and young children. As for the fathers of families: as the negro, without exception, holds precisely the same view of the permanence of the marital relation as do the advanced disciples of the new moral cult, no hardship was ever involved, no sentiment outraged by the severance of connubial ties.

Again, with regard to the amount of labor demanded of the slaves: On most plantations "task-work" was the rule. A fair allotment of work was made to each negro, and when that work was done, be the hour early or late, the day's toil was ended. The writer has frequently seen plantation negroes trooping home soon after noon.

It is to be remembered that two problems confronted the South—a labor problem, and a race problem—each of them grave enough to tax the powers of statecraft to the uttermost. The South was altogether an agricultural community dependent for its bread upon negro labor, and negro labor, unless compulsory, was (and is) absolutely unreliable. Thus much for the industrial problem.

For the still graver one: With the overwhelming disparity of numbers in favor of the blacks as between the two classes of its population, in sheer self-defense it was compelled to exercise a vigilant control over the excitable semi-barbarous people in its midst. All honor to the old South in that, while necessarily strict, this control was also both wise and humane!

Thus stands the case, which I have endeavored to present without undue partiality, for the consideration of those interested in the study of an institution vitally and inseparably connected with the history of the South.